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March 6, 2012

To: Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman
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From: Philip L. Browning
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PROGRESS REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORE EFFECTIVE CHILD SAFETY AND RISK ASSESSMENT TOOLS INCLUSIVE OF STRUCTURED DECISION MAKING

On December 20, 2011 the Board approved a contract with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency with the understanding that the Director or his designee would report back on the progress to initiate improvements with the SDM tools and explore alternative methods to assessing the safety and risk to children for future abuse and/or neglect.

Background

Currently, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) mandates the use of written and standardized safety and risk assessment tools at key decision points in the life of a case. DCFS is currently one of 55 California counties utilizing the SDM assessment tools. CDSS bears all expenses for the SDM software application and SafeMeasures© monitors its use. The three counties not utilizing SDM are using the only other identified tool for use in California, namely, the Comprehensive Assessment Tool (CAT). SDM has also been implemented in part or all of 16 other states and several other nations. Curam Software for Child Welfare, a new subsidiary of IBM that has a long-term partnership with the Children's Research Center (CRC), declares that the SDM model is "one of the most widely used assessment and decision support methodologies in use today and research has demonstrated its effectiveness."

In or about 1998 seven California counties, including Los Angeles, evaluated and developed the newer SDM tools, subsequently piloted the SDM tools, and adapted solely the use of SDM instead of the CAT. Since 1998, the County of Los Angeles has been an active developer of the SDM tools which resulted in format and content changes that have been accepted statewide, and has maintained "experts" in each regional office, and an "expert" workgroup, inclusive of both DCFS program and community partners, which has annually sent representatives to statewide and national workgroups to improve the tools.

"To Enrich Lives Through Effective and Caring Service"

Actions Taken and Planned to Improve SDM for the County of Los Angeles

On January 25, 2012, DCFS surveyed all staff to solicit feedback on how the SDM tools could be improved, what is working with the tools, and what is not. The survey results have been compiled and will be vetted by a re-formed DCFS SDM workgroup of local experts. The DCFS expert workgroup will be tasked with developing recommendations regarding modifications to the tools, changes to the application, and expressed training needs which will then be submitted to CRC. CRC and CDSS conduct an annual statewide Core workgroup meeting which will take place on April 16, 2012.

Survey concerns with the tool will be forwarded to the Core meeting and include the following:
- Incongruence of the Risk Assessment determination to open a case for services based on risk while the State's Child Welfare System/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) only allows open case services on substantiated child abuse and/or neglect allegations.
- Weighting of prior unfounded referrals is the same as inconclusive or substantiated referrals on the Risk Assessment.
- Weighting of current and prior drug and/or alcohol issues are all the same on the Risk Assessment.
- Weighting of prior case services, whether voluntary or court ordered, are the same on the Risk Assessment.
- Weighting of domestic violence is insufficient on the Risk Assessment.
- Weighting of mental health factors are insufficient on the Risk Assessment, and Parental Diagnostical and Statistical Manual Axis II diagnoses are not measured.
- Criminal history, whether gained from DOJ or parental report, is weighted the same on the Risk Assessment. The definition of criminal history needs to clarify whether juvenile records are counted in criminal history.
- The Risk Assessment appears to focus on neglect and physical abuse, without considering emotional abuse and sexual abuse (specifically teenage girls and sibling differences).

CRC will research the data and logistical impacts of DCFS' recommendations, prepare materials that foster a discussion of each recommendation among the statewide experts, and experts will vote on the recommendations, each SDM county receiving one vote.

DCFS will continue SDM training and management oversight. Every new social worker is provided nine to 12 hours of instructor-led training on SDM followed by on-going unit-based training. Sixteen refresher SDM trainings for social workers and four refresher SDM trainings for supervisors were provided in 2010 and 2011. CRC also provides quarterly Webinar trainings on a variety of topics, including the following topics in 2012: "Safety vs. Risk," "SDM Informed Safety Planning," "Risk and Equity," and "Integrating Safety and Needs in Case Planning." All Deputy Directors and Regional Managers who manage the delivery of line services have included the enhanced use of five SDM tools in their MAPP goals for FY2011-12. SDM has also been incorporated and aligns with the DCFS Core Practice Model and Quality Service Review evaluation points.

Survey of Other Safety and Risk Assessment Tools Used Nationwide

In January 2012, DCFS contacted The Annie Casey Foundation to explore what research may be available on child abuse and neglect prevention assessments or tools. Casey Family Programs was in the process of conducting a nationwide survey of assessment tools used across the country. The Casey Foundation will provide DCFS the national survey soon, and follow-up will be made with jurisdictions that seem to have promising alternative tools.

Exploration of Data Analytic Solutions to Child Welfare Risk and Prevention of Abuse and/or Neglect

DCFS contacted leading vendors in the nation on data analytics applied to human services to explore how data analytics, predictive analytics, data mining, and/or social network analysis have been applied to child abuse and neglect prevention. One vendor reported that it has not yet applied its data analytic models to child abuse and neglect prevention, but has successfully applied analytics to prevent child care fraud, measure health outcomes, link adults to services, and manage law enforcement data. Another vendor indicated it was testing a tool and reported that the analytic tool was able to predict 90% of the child abuse and/or neglect referrals that were historically determined to be "unfounded" and 70% of the referrals that were historically "founded" (i.e., "substantiated").

DCFS will continue to pursue the use of data analytics to prevent child abuse and neglect with leading vendors of data analytics for improved human services, as well as others who become known to us. Further, DCFS will continue to improve and enhance the SDM tools for the children and families in the County of Los Angeles through both internal processes and external partnerships with CDSS, CRC, and other SDM participating counties.

If you have any questions, please call me or your staff may call Aldo Marin, Board Relations Manager at (213) 351-5530. Thank you.

PB:BN:vm

c: Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors